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SUBJECT: SAMARRA MOSQUE RECONSTRUCTION: PRIME MINISTER'S
ADVISOR UPDATES ON PROGRESS

Classified By: Acting Political Section Counselor
Ellen Germain for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (S) Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister on Reconstruction Issues, Engineer Haq al Hakim, told poloffs and UNAMI staff during an October 24 meeting that the assessment phase of the Samarra Mosque reconstruction project in Salah ad Din Province is set to commence soon, pending finalization of agreements on security between the GOI, a Turkish contractor, and a group of local tribal sheikhs. PM Maliki reportedly vetoed participation in the project by Turkish troops for project security, citing political concerns. Hakim expects UNESCO to manage funding for the project) an understanding which is at slight variance with local UN staff understandings. Hakim confirmed that the GOI is by-passing the provincial government and instead engaging with local sheikhs on the mosque project and a larger effort to help rebuild and revitalize the city. Hakim welcomed the Embassy and MNF-I's continued cooperation and engagement with his office to ensure the project proceeds smoothly. He believes the entire program will take between three to five years to complete. End Summary.

Status of Reconstruction

¶2. (S) On October 24, poloffs and UNAMI representative met with Supreme Construction Council Advisor to the Prime Minister, Engineer Haq al Hakim, to discuss the status of reconstruction on the Samarra mosque in the north-central province of Salah ad Din. Hakim, a computer engineer trained in Jordan, expected an assessment of the project to begin as early as a month, pending conclusion of negotiations between the GOI, the Turkish contractor, and a group of Samarra Sheikhs. Hakim said the project went beyond rebuilding of the Shia mosque to include a variety of social and infrastructure projects to revitalize the city. The GOI, he said, had worked during the past eight months on the project plans, identifying a Turkish contractor to complete the mosque reconstruction. The Supreme Construction Council, he said, includes PM Maliki, the ministries of interior, defense, trade, reconstruction/housing, and has two sub-committees to address technical and financial issues. Reconstruction of the Shia Al Askari shrine, destroyed in a February 2006 terrorist attack, and further damaged in a June 2007 attack, will cost approximately USD 16 million, with five million coming from the GOI and the remainder from UNESCO and the EU.

Security Main Concern, Tribes to Play a Role

13. (S) Hakim emphasized that project security remains a core concern, noting that the GOI is still negotiating details with the Turkish contractor and local Samarra Sheikhs. A tribal support council has been organized to assist with the mosque and city revitalization project, and coordinate with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). A meeting with the sheikhs will be organized soon to work out a number of related agreements.

He said the Turkish contractor is responsible for security for the construction site and perimeter, but later noted that the contractor had met only once with Major General Rasheed, the GOI lead on Samarra security. Hakim said the PM rejected a proposal by the contractor to use roughly 40 Turkish security forces to secure the interior and perimeter of the mosque. Recent tensions with Turkey and the controversy over private security firms in Iraq led the PM to favor GOI security forces and local sheikhs for the job, Hakim said. The contractor would be ready to begin a building assessment in roughly a month, he noted, but cautioned that the project would not begin without the appropriate security provisions and agreements in place.

Embassy/MNF, UNESCO Roles in Project

14. (S) Responding to questions on project security, Hakim welcomed Embassy/MNF participation in project planning. He recognized MNF security equities and believed it useful to have Embassy involvement prior to commencement of the project (Note: Embassy/MNF plan to regularly engage Hakim and his staff to ensure open lines of communication. End note). The UNAMI representative, who represents UNESCO interests in Baghdad, learned during the meeting that the GOI and UNESCO are not yet in sync over the respective roles and

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responsibilities for the project. Whereas the UN wants to ensure GOI ownership of the project, Hakim said he believed the UN would play a far more robust role on financing and managing the project. Hakim said the GOI transferred its USD 3 million share for mosque reconstruction to UNESCO, which he believed would pay the Turkish contractor. The UNAMI representative said he believed the Turkish contractor would assume responsibility for reconstruction oversight and the GOI for payment of the contractor, while the UN would serve an advisory role only. Hakim said that meetings between the contractor and UNESCO were occurring on a regular basis in Amman.

Cutting Out The Provincial Government

15. (S) Hakim confirmed that the GOI is working directly with Samarra City officials and local sheikhs on the mosque project, effectively by-passing the Salah ad Din Provincial Council (PC) and Governor. "There is no role for the PC or governor in shrine reconstruction," he stated flatly, asserting a lack of confidence among Samarra residents that provincial government involvement would be productive (Note: Hakim mentioned a plan to widen the mosque's outer security perimeter by demolishing homes near the site. GOI funding, he said, was available for compensation of residents. End note.)

Comment

16. (S) Hakim's expectations on project commencement appear overly optimistic. The decision to cut out the provincial government entirely may also lead to longer-term political complications, especially since PCs are responsible for determining allocation amounts for district capital spending projects. In the 2008 budget recently passed by the Salah ad Din PC, Samarra received a mere 6.6 percent of development

funding despite having 17 percent of the province's population (septel). In comparison, Tikrit, with 15 percent of the population received 33.8 percent of the budget allocation, and Tuz, with 13 percent of the population, received 27.66 percent of the allocation. The decision by the PM's office to work with tribal sheikhs suggests a strategy of building ties with local leaders who can be trusted (or at least, bought off) in order to protect the government-owned Shia mosque against future attacks by Al Qaida and similar groups. End Comment.
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